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ABSTRACT

The minimum linguistic competence required of an English teacher must be sufficient knowledge to assess continuously the role of direct teaching of linguistics in the classroom; to express, directly or not, views about the nature of language and the structure of English which accord with the best scholarship available; and to counterbalance the effects of his own learning of English and guarantee the native speaker that the linguistic apparatus which will be used on or near him will be as self-consistent and comprehensive as possible. The linguistic theory which best suits the English teacher is one which fits our intuitions and knowledge of the internalized theory of native speakers; has a strong developmental aspect; is truly comprehensive in the corpus it can describe and in the distinctions it can make during description; makes possible descriptions which are internally divided and isolating and in which close contact is always maintained between abstract categories and texts; and contains a pragmatic component which allows useful discussion of style, correctness, and acceptability. (HOD)

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STUDY GROUP PAPER NO. 8

Linguistics and the Teaching of English

by

John M. Sinclair

Introduction

The phrase "English teacher" throughout this paper refers to someone who teaches English to young native English speakers. An English teacher may never divide his functions into "lang." and "lit." work, but this must not obscure the fact that he is a language teacher just as much as is a teacher of any other language to native or foreign pupils. In recent years there has been a growing amount of discussion between language teachers and linguists about the ways in which modern theories of language, and descriptive works based on these theories, might help the task of the teacher. This paper briefly examines first the price the English teacher has to pay for his linguistics and what his motivation to purchase should be; and secondly what criteria he should use in his choice from what is offered and likely to be offered.

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SECTION I. What does the English teacher need to know about linguistics and the structure of the English language?

Direct teaching

It is open to the English teacher to teach courses in the structure of English, where at least part of his aim is to give his pupils an understanding of the categories and methods of modern linguistic description. It is also well inside his terms of reference to teach courses in general linguistics. This might take many forms. He might show the relationship of English to other languages, perhaps, or the relationships between speaking and other human activities, or he might tackle theory in the context of the description of the native language. An English teacher, again, might feel strongly that his pupils should be able to transcribe speech with some precision, and he would therfore prepare courses on phonetics.

Courses such as these would be in the familiar tradition of language teaching; they would involve formal displays of the results of language analysis, and the displays would be offered for their own sakes in the first instance. There are many such courses being offered today; the spread of the "new" grammar is not much slower than the recession of the "old" grammar, and the pace of the spread is accelerating.

At the present time, no resolution of the problems of the nature of formal teaching can be seen. The Dartmouth Seminar, one hopes, will make a significant advance by stating the problems clearly and separating them from each other. "Old" structural teaching seems to have failed the test of time; "new" structural teaching offers only potential and faces a hail of criticism and gloomy prognostication. The last ten years have seen great

changes in linguistic theory, but the textbooks and the background books are just beginning to record and analyse and interpret these advances; their possible and actual effect on the classroom cannot be assessed for several years. One certain feature of the professional scene in the coming years will be controversy over the role of direct linguistics teaching from the cradle onwards.

What does the teacher need to know? Clearly we cannot specify anything as a necessity in advance of an evaluation of the results of experiment. But the existence of the controversy makes it essential that an English teacher know enough about linguistics to make up his own mind. The last two years has seen the start of the supply of information and opinion directly to teachers in the form of books written specially for them, some of them too recent to be taken into account in this paper. Presumably an English teacher in training at present will study these books in detail.

We can go no farther than that. A closer look at the content of linguistics courses, or a survey of specific arguments on their educational basis, would lie outside the title of this paper. They would rather be answers to the question "What does the pupil need to know...," with an inference that the teacher would have to know too. All we must prescribe for the English teacher as regards teaching of linguistics (including formal structural teaching) is enough knowledge to evaluate the changing scene, to experiment with new approaches, and to calculate the effect of the advances on his teaching as a whole. No less is expected of a teacher in any other subject.

The teacher as a linguist

We now leave aside the question of what is taught explicitly in the classroom and turn to what may not be so obviously taught. Linguistics is often offered as a suggestion to language teachers, as if it were something they could reject. This is implied, for example, in my title. Now of course it is open to a teacher to reject any particular brand of linguistics or to regard it as of limited or of general use in his execution of his duties, but he cannot teach English without some linguistics. He may conceal it from his pupils and even largely from himself; he may play down the language side as much as possible. But the teaching of a language inevitably implies the analysis of it. Syllabuses must be prepared, and lessons within syllabuses. Standards must be defined. The pupils must be assessed. No pupil could survive such an exposure to language analysis without acquiring from his teacher

(a) a general attitude to language,

(b) a very large number of observations about the structure of the language.

We need look no farther than learning to read and write to see the truth of this statement. The pupil must examine his sound system and imbibe a writing system from scratch. He must understand what a transcription is. Some explanation must be offered him for the existence of ambiguities in his speech and his writing, explanation also for the much-vaunted oddities thrown up by a lack of correlation between the two systems. He must be given reasons why he must learn to read and write, and so he will also learn something of the social role of linguistic communication.

The linguistic sciences attempt to answer the question "What is the nature of those parts of our physical, mental, and social organisation which enable us to attach an arbitrary significance to utterances?" The native language teacher is the first person a child meets who is professionally concerned with providing a partial answer to this question, whether he means to or not.

The duty of the teacher is quite clear. If his views on the nature of language are going to rub off anyway, it is up to him to examine them most critically in the light of what full-time linguists have to say. If his detailed knowledge of the structure of his native language is going to pervade a great deal of his teaching, he should feel secure that it is the best available. This argues a heavy commitment to linguistics, since it demands not only intellectual understanding of the subject but daily practical use of it. In turn, linguistic theory and descriptions will have to meet conditions like those set out in Section II.

Tradgram

It is too early yet to say that we have got rid of traditional grammar and oversimplified standards in favour of either superior analytical systems or another sort of approach altogether. We are apt to forget that we still have the inheritance of what we learned ourselves. We have, for example, a rich and flexible international terminology for language analysis, so valuable that modern linguistics is adapting it rather than replacing it. We have the sociolinguistic status quo in the received standards of correctness, attitudes to dialects, and jargons and linguistic change. We have our own

conditioned responses (e.g., to bad spelling) which may still surprise us. It is difficult for the established present-day English teacher to imagine what it is like not to know a system of analysing the language, nor to have hairspring sensitivity to the indexical features of language. We can reject tradgram from our syllabuses but not from our own thoughts and attitudes.

Two points emerge from the preceding. One is outside the terms of this paper, but would be a discussion of what it is like to be ignorant of the analysis of one's native language. The other is that a teacher is in need of training in how to be objective about his own linguistic behaviour, prejudices, and automatic reactions.

The native speaker as learner

Someone who teaches English to foreign pupils in their own country is often the only model that the pupils have. Someone teaching English to foreign students in the United Kingdom or the United States has to take into account the other models to which his students will be exposed. Someone teaching English to native speakers faces the problem that his pupils are already expert at some important aspects of English, and that they therefore set different standards of explanation. An explanation of, say, a grammatical point, which a pupil can compare with his knowledge and experience of English, and which survives the comparison, is useful; one which is inaccurate is at best useless and at worst confusing. It is unwise to take liberties with native speakers or to underestimate their powers of detecting inconsistencies in linguistic argument. They may not be explicit about inaccuracies, but they will recognise them just the same. The utility value of what they learn about their language will depend largely on how

far they can perceive it correlating with their internalised competence.

A great deal more research is needed on the relationship between what the native speaker is taught about his language and what he already knows; in the meantime we should play safe and adopt aims like

(a) precision of statement, no matter how elementary or how disguised,

(b) coherence of statements with regard to each other so that a consistent picture is built up by the pupil,

(c) full explanations for all attempts to alter a pupil's linguistic habits.

To carry out these aims, a teacher would require considerable linguistic expertise.

Section I Summary

It appears from the foregoing that the minimum linguistic competence required of an English teacher must be sufficient knowledge

(a) to assess continuously the role of direct teaching of linguistics in the classroom,

(b) to express, directly or not, views about the nature of language and the structure of English which accord with the best scholarship available,

(c) to counterbalance the effects of his own learning of English,

(d) to guarantee the native speaker that the linguistic apparatus which will be used on or near him will be as self-consistent and comprehensive as possible.

Nothing short of a proper professional training in linguistics will suffice. No case has been made here for specialised English language

teachers. Every English teacher needs to learn about the present state of linguistics. Every teacher needs to be able to follow developments in theory and description throughout his teaching career.

SECTION II. What are the properties of a linguistic theory such that the description of English will be the most baluable to teachers of English?

Linguistic theories

A linguistic theory provides categories with which languages can be described. It must have enough categories of the right type, and no more. It cannot be modified if by chance it does not suit a language teacher. In the next few paragraphs the language teacher's preferences will be mentioned. Any of them could be the deciding factor in choosing between two linguistic theories which were otherwise equivalent, but the equivalence of the theories would have to be established in advance. For example, a teacher who proposes to use linguistic description overtly in class will be on the lookout for a theory with a simple and restricted terminology and a grammar which is based on obvious units such as word and sentence. A linguist offering a theory which created a huge terminology and worked with units which could scarcely be related to words and sentences might have to retort that no theory could otherwise account for the nature of language. A linguist talking to English teachers often feels he should apologise, as it were, for the nature of language.

Human beings

No-one knows exactly how a human being stores and uses his linguistic knowledge, but everyone speculates. A description of a language which precisely modelled the behaviour of native speakers would be a start, but it still could be organised according to entirely different principles. At present one assesses the "naturalness" of a linguistic theory by mainly emotional reaction; as knowledge of mental processes grows, the choice may rest on sounder criteria. Until then, the English teacher should rely solely on his intuitions about the nature of language.

A native learner of English has an important developmental aspect to his linguistic behaviour. This is obvious in his early years, but once he has mastered the common phonological and syntactic patterns of English we tend to think that he only adds a few frills from a developmental point of view. As yet we are fairly ignorant of the later stages of development, while the learner is at school and beyond. Descriptive linguists find it convenient to suppose for the purposes of analysis that the language is stable in time and that informants do not differ on a developmental axis. In emphasising the contrast between synchronic and diachronic linguistics they have tended to equip themselves for description along a single dimension only. The English teacher is not directly concerned with the language behaviour of mature adults. He may select some of it as his teaching model, that is all. But he does need to understand the difficulties his pupils face and their typical patterns of development so that he can organise his material economically and effectively.

Comprehensiveness

With each linguistic description we can associate a corpus of utterances, namely those which are satisfactorily described. It is unlikely that two differently organised descriptions will relate to exactly the same corpus, even though there will be a great deal of overlap. Again, a description will reveal normally that it is designed to cope with certain utterances in an elegant manner but drags in the rest solely in order to be comprehensive. All descriptions of English will be satisfactory, no doubt, with a sentence like the cat sat on the mat, but some may not be illuminating about no smoking.

Each English teacher has a good idea of the corpus of utterances with which he is concerned. He would do well to be as explicit as possible about his corpus and then to examine the market to see if his interests can be met. The teacher may also want to insist on certain features of the description of the utterances; he may, for example, be prepared to back a phonetics theory only if it can help him to dexcribe what we call "tone of voice."

In its early years the linguistic discussion of literary texts lost impact because of its suggestions that great writers used deviant grammar and linguistic trickery. Current popular theories had no provision for distinguishing between different types of deviation from everyday usage. Since literary texts figure largely in the normal English curriculum, this lack had the effect of tying one of the teacher's hands behind his back.

The English teacher, then, must decide what corpus he is interested in and what particular features of the corpus are likely to be important, and then he must study the market to see if his demands can be met, watching out for "ragbag" descriptions where a spurious comprehensiveness is gained by simple listing or little more than that.

A typical example of the focussing interests of teachers is the attention being paid at present to the study of specialised varieties of English. The linguistic theories have not yet caught up with the needs of teachers because of the present speed of change. In the traditional teaching pattern in the United Kingdom there was hardly any attention paid to this aspect of language patterning, and some of the teaching was willingly delegated to specialist teachers of other subjects. Now it is a growth point, and a linguistic theory which incorporates high-level statements about language varieties will be preferred to one which includes variety differentials as little more than a mopping-up operation in description.

Internal relations

Each and every feature of a linguistic theory could be assessed for its value in language-teaching, however unrealistic the assessment might be. There seem to be two general features which are worth separate assessment; the internal divisions of the theory and resultant descriptions, and the contact with physically-occurring language.

With reference to the network of related categories which constitutes a linguistic theory, we can ask the question "How isolated is each component from all the others?" or "How simple is the input to each component?"

The process of teaching language systematically or explaining particular features is aided by the presentation of material in small, relatively isolated portions, and a theory should be examined with this point in mind. There is a good supporting reason at the present time, when all branches of linguistics are feverishly active. Minor improvements to descriptions are suggested day by day but can only be incorporated if their disturbance to the rest of the description is purely local. English teachers are not yet acclimatised to grammars which change more rapidly than the language they describe, and so careful consideration should be given to this practical point.

Language which actually occurs is the main evidence on which descriptions are based and from which theories evolve. Theories are abstract, but their provisions for contact between description and text may differ in directness.

The language teacher has to handle actual language, find examples, correct, and advise. If a description is to be useful to him, it will be one which maintains close contact with the textual phenomena. A criterion such as this is dangerous in practice, since it might lead to preference being given to a description that boasted a spurious simplicity. But it is a substantial criterion nevertheless. It seems almost certain that the teacher will have to avoid reference to difficult linguistic abstractions in most of his teaching. He is therefore reliant on some kind of inductive process being established (or tapped).

Language skills

An English teacher has as a major concern the development of language skills in his pupils. He has to teach people how to do things with their language. Therefore he is looking for a theory which stresses the pragmatic side of linguistic description. On this depends so many things. His theory must contain evaluative criteria. It must enable him to move towards assessing the success of an utterance on a particular occasion. It must include (as we have seen) an elaborate treatment of the nature of specialised varieties of a language. It must come to grips with the central concepts of style, correctness, and acceptability. For some time now linguists have tended to take a far too narrow view of their subject-matter. Description, not prescription, was the motto; the accent was on structural patterning, and the actual pragmatic value of an utterance in a discourse was never discussed. At the present time, "correct English" and "good style" are terms from different, if not incompatible, areas of the subject; from a pragmatic point of view they are different stages of the same process, that of creating effective utterances.

Section II Summary

The linguistic theory which suits the English teacher best is one which

(a) fits our intuitions and knowledge of the internalised theory of native speakers,

(b) has a strong developmental aspect,

(c) is truly comprehensive in the corpus it can describe and in the distinctions it can make during description,

(d) makes possible descriptions which are internally divided and isolating and in which close contact is always maintained between abstract categories and texts,

(e) contains a pragmatic component which allows useful discussion of style, correctness, and acceptability.